

The Circleville Massacre and the Battle of Gravelly Ford

Every endeavor should be made and every precaution used to protect yourselves and your settlements against the attacks of such treacherous foes. . . . It is only by being constantly vigilant that you can ensure the safety of the people and the preservation of their property against these surprises and sudden attacks.

—Brigham Young¹

War Hysteria and Indian Killing

UPON LEARNING OF Sanpitch's death, Orson Hyde put Sanpete and Sevier county militia companies on alert. Certain the botched hostage plan would provoke "the whole Utah nation [to] unite with Black Hawk," he and other Latter-day Saints anticipated "hot times."² Therefore, Hyde issued orders for the total evacuation of Salina, Glenwood, and Monroe. Once it was reinforced with Mormons from the evacuated settlements, Hyde deemed Richfield to be strong enough to repulse the vicious attacks he expected. Similarly, he considered Circleville and Panguitch relatively safe because of the construction then in progress of a Nauvoo Legion garrison called Fort Sanford that was strategically located between the two settlements.³ Hyde sent wagons and teamsters from the Sanpete settlements to carry the evacuees away. He also

¹ Brigham Young to Orson Hyde, 31 May 1865, BYC.

² Warren S. Snow to William B. Pace, 15 April 1866, WBP; Orson Hyde to George A. Smith, 26 April 1866, GAS; and George A. Smith to Brigham Young, Jr., May 1866, HOLB, 2:535-39.

³ Located on the Sevier River near the mouth of Bear Creek, Fort Sanford was established in March 1866. Mormon military leaders deemed it of great strategic value not only because it provided protection for Panguitch and Circleville but also because it guarded a spur of the Old Spanish Trail that potentially could be used to drive off stock from Parowan, Paragonah, and Beaver.

dispatched herds of Sanpete and Sevier valley cattle to Salt Lake City to be traded for weapons and ammunition as well as for tents, saddles, and other accouterments necessary for Indian fighting.⁴

On 21 April 1866, militiamen chasing stock stolen from Monroe were ambushed within two hundred yards of the tiny fort at Marysvale. Four whites were shot, one dying instantly, while a second died a month later. The soldiers retreated while their attackers escaped with the animals.⁵ The same day, frightened militiamen near Fort Sanford initiated a chain of events that shortly would result in the worst massacre of the entire war. Following the raid on Salina and the jailbreak at Manti, "friendly" Piedes residing near Circleville told settlers that Black Hawk was gathering his forces at Fish Lake preparatory to attacks intended to drive the whites from the Sevier Valley. Nervous Mormons from Circleville, Fort Sanford, and Panguitch observed small squads of unfamiliar Indians with painted faces mysteriously traveling up and down the Sevier. Orders were issued to apprehend and question the strangers in an attempt to learn the meaning of their movements.

On 22 April, militiamen at Fort Sanford noticed two Indians "be-daubed with paint" coming up the opposite side of the Sevier River and sent two men to bring them to the stockade for questioning. Fearful because of the recent killings, the Indians refused to come to the fort. When the soldiers became adamant, the natives shot a militiaman in the shoulder and attempted to flee. In the process, one Indian was killed and the other wounded as he made good his escape. The two whites returned to the fort with word that the Indians "were on express from Black Hawk's band."⁶

It was assumed that the messengers were enlisting support for Black Hawk, and dispatches were sent to Panguitch and Circleville "advising that the Indians encamped near the two settlements be immediately disarmed." The following day, 23 April, a small detachment of Nauvoo Legion men surrounded a band of Piedes near Panguitch. They discovered the camp all "packed and tied up, ready for a move." The militia noticed that most of the men were away and concluded the braves had already joined Black Hawk at Fish Lake. Four adult males re-

⁴ JH, 24 April 1866, 1; Warren S. Snow to Brigham Young and Daniel H. Wells, 21 April 1866 TMR, #839; Weibye, "Daybook," 47-48; and Gottfredson, *Indian Depredations*, 226.

⁵ John W. Peterson, *Autobiography*, 4-7; Zebulon Jacobs, "Journal," 10-12 May 1866; and Gottfredson, *Indian Depredations*, 193-95.

⁶ Erastus Snow to Daniel H. Wells, 25 April 1866, TMR, #1524; Gottfredson, *Indian Depredations*, 190-93; JH, 22 April 1866, 1, and 5 May 1866, 2; and Fish, "Diaries," 24.

mained with the women and children, however, and when the soldiers attempted to take their weapons they commenced firing with muskets and arrows. One white was struck with an arrow and two Piedades were killed, including an old shaman the Mormons called "Doctor Bill." According to one Nauvoo Legion report, "the killing of Old Bill (the medicine man) cowed the Indians more than the loss of twenty warriors would, [for] their tradition made him Bullet proof." The Mormons concluded that "this must also have been his own belief for he commenced firing when surrounded by a party of 14 well armed men." Stores of guns, powder, and lead, "many new arrows, and about a peck of new arrow points" convinced some Latter-day Saints the Panguitch band was indeed preparing for war.⁷

The Circleville Massacre

Meanwhile, orders to disarm "friendly" Piedades near Circleville reached that community. Just days before, raiders made off with "twenty-five head of cattle, two mules and two horses," and "unfamiliar" Indians were seen visiting the local Piedad encampment. Before light on 23 April, militiamen surrounded the camp and forcefully "invited" several Indians to come to town for a "talk." Once they were in Circleville, the Piedades were informed that since they were suspected of aiding Black Hawk they were now considered prisoners.

Later that day, Circleville militiamen intercepted two Lamanite "strangers" near the Piedad camp and killed one of them when they tried to escape. Local Mormons were afraid the Piedades still in camp would take word of the killing to Black Hawk; therefore, the surviving "strange Indian" and the entire Piedad band, including women and children, were rounded up and taken at gunpoint to Circleville. The terrified Indians allegedly "confesed to [carrying] ammunition to the hostile Indians." They also announced that Black Hawk was at nearby Fish Lake, where Utes, Paiutes, Piedades, Pahvants, and Navajos were gathering "to unite against us," and threatened that soon Circle Valley would "be full of them."

Realizing their exposed position and their proximity to Black Hawk's forces and fearing they had just killed one of the war chief's "emissaries," the settlers determined to place the entire band under guard while they sent to church leaders in Beaver for instructions. In

⁷ Erastus Snow to Daniel H. Wells, 25 April 1866; Gottfredson, *Indian Depredations*, 191-92; JH, 22 April 1866, 2; and Silas S. Smith to George A. Smith, 29 May 1866, GAS.

all, twenty Píedes were incarcerated: nine men in the community's meetinghouse, and five women and six children in a nearby cellar. After just one day in confinement, on 24 April, six of the nine males "severed the thongs binding their hands" and were in the process of freeing their friends when "one of the guards discovered what was going on." "A brief, and fatal fight ensued between the guards and the liberated prisoners," and, since "the former [had] the advantage of their 'arms,' " they soon "dispatched the Indians and sent them into Eternity." The remaining males were confined with their women and children in the cellar.

Having suffered repeated attacks at the hands of the raiders in which some of their own people had been brutalized, and fully expecting their tiny settlement to be destroyed if word of these latest killings of Indians reached Black Hawk (who they were sure was camped with his whole force at nearby Fish Lake), the Circleville Saints held a "hearing." One settler remembered that "a few men in the community exhibited great hatred for the Indians," and it seems they now seized control, for the consensus was to destroy every Indian old enough to tell. The Píede males, the five women, and the two oldest children were "taken up one at a time" from their cellar prison and had their throats slit. The four remaining youngsters were "saved and adopted by good families."⁸ Tradition among some of Circleville's descendants is that one Indian climbed up the meetinghouse chimney during the escape attempt and survived the carnage. Returning to the settlement sometime later, he apparently boasted of his escape to a Mormon, who then hired him to "dig a pit in [the] bottom of his orchard." When the pit was finished, the Circleville "Saint" allegedly "hit him in the head and killed him," burying the last of Circle Valley's Píedes in a grave dug by his own hands.⁹

Paiute oral tradition remembers the Circleville Massacre in this manner:

There used to be a big old log house in Circleville, Utah, beside the road where it curves near where the potato cellars are. Years

⁸ William J. Allred, Bishop of Circleville, to George A. Smith, 5 May 1866, GAS; Erastus Snow to General Wells, 25 April 1866, TMR, #1524; Oluf Larsen, "Biographical Sketch," 47-48, and variation in DUP, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 210-12; Jacobs, "Journal," 10-12 May 1866; Reddick N. Allred to Major Seeley, 27 April 1866, in Andrew Madsen, "Personal History," 63-64; Culmsee, *Utah's Black Hawk War*, 90-91; Tolton, "Memories," 9-10; and Winkler, "The Circleville Massacre."

⁹ Alton Blackburn, interview by Charles S. Peterson, Sunnyside, Utah, 1966, notes in author's possession.

ago the white men at Circleville locked up in that house all the Indians who were living nearby and told them they were going to cut their throats. They began doing this by taking them outside one at a time and cutting their throats.

There were two young men inside who decided they were going to escape. One said to the other "We will have to dash through them and run just as they open the door." They did this and ran through the white men who were gathered all around, some on horseback. They opened fire on these two Indians but couldn't hit them. They ran towards the cemetery on the hill to the north and as they were going over it, one of the pursuing white men on horseback shot one of the Indians in his side by his ribs but it was only a flesh wound. From there they ran up into the mountains and then the wounded Indian put some Indian medicine on his wound and wrapped it in part of his shirt. The white men didn't follow them far so from there they went on over to Parowan or Beaver.¹⁰

The Circleville Massacre was the greatest single tragedy of the Black Hawk War. At first it appears the Circleville Saints sought to cover up the full extent of their involvement, representing that "all but the papooses" were killed *while attacking their guards*.¹¹ On hearing this sanitized report, Daniel Wells wrote that, considering the circumstances, he "could not well see how the brethren there . . . could have done less." Brigham Young, however, was immediately disgusted, and fully a decade after he learned the complete story he still publicly deplored the affair, noting that he believed the curse of God rested upon Circle Valley and its inhabitants because "a band of our Lamenite [*sic*] brethren and their families, were here cruelly slain." As he then sized it up, the settlers of Circleville "excused" their "cruel act," claiming it was a "necessity of war."¹²

On the other hand, Orson Hyde was pleased when he learned of the killings. "Sanpitch and his Braves and the Piutes of Circleville have received that kind of gospel which they merit," he wrote his fellow apostle George A. Smith. "I do not know but that there are friendly Indians in Utah," he stated, "but I must confess I know not where they

¹⁰ Martineau, *Southern Paiutes*, 58–59.

¹¹ For example, see Colonel R.N. Allred to Major William Seeley, 27 April 1866, in DUP, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 9:180.

¹² Daniel H. Wells to Erastus Snow, 3 May 1866, in JH, 3 May 1866, 3–5; and "Gunnison Ward Historical Record," 18.

are." Reflecting the spirit of war hysteria that precipitated the killings in the first place, he continued:

You will learn of their uniting for the purpose of using us up. The Utes, Piutes, Pauvantes and Navahoes in the South . . . and there is said to be a heavy force of Utes in Spanish Fork Canyon, probably far up enabling the Indians of Uinta Valley to join them. Thus on our North a Strong force of the enemy, and likewise on the South who contemplate no doubt simultaneous action. You will see that we are threatened with extermination.

Hyde closed his letter by praying that God would "soon strike a blow that will make his people free from the miserable clans and hordes that fight against Mt. Zion."¹³

These sentiments were typical of those expressed in Hyde's correspondence and recorded addresses throughout the period. The apostle's attitudes are significant because they give some insight into how Sanpete and Sevier county Latter-day Saints could take the brutal and violent measures they did when Brigham Young most often urged the opposite course. Many settlers felt that Young, living as he did in his mansions in Salt Lake City, was far removed from the problems and issues they faced. On the other hand, Hyde, the top-ranking local authority, actually lived in Sanpete County and, losing substantial numbers of his own stock to the raiders, he shared their troubles. Throughout the war, the Sanpete apostle provided leadership to central Utah Saints that was often diametrically opposed to the more peaceful policies Young sought to pursue. Long known to other Mormons for their extraordinary penchant for violence, the Saints under Hyde's jurisdiction were quick to put aside Young's peace policy for their local leader's more malignant rhetoric.¹⁴ The Indians themselves could sense the difference, and before the 1866 season was over it became clear that many of them considered themselves at war specifically with Sanpete and Sevier valley settlers and not with Mormons generally.¹⁵

Another Shift in Strategy

Despite the growing hatred for Indians nurtured in Sanpete and Sevier counties, Brigham Young reverted to a more peaceful strategy after his

¹³ Orson Hyde to George A. Smith, 26 April 1866, GAS.

¹⁴ For example, see Charles Kelly and Hoffinan, *Holy Murder*, 188.

¹⁵ A.F. MacDonald to William B. Pace, 24 May 1866, WBP; Brigham Young to Orson Hyde, 16 May 1866, BYC; and CR, 223.